

## **Municipal Officials Drop Opposition to Court Merger Study**

**Thursday, October 4, 2007**

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**Today's Sunbeam**

SALEM -- Once they understood a feasibility study wouldn't cost their residents a dime, most municipal officials dropped their defenses Wednesday night during a special meeting to discuss a potential study on merging municipal courts in the county.

While many had their doubts it would yield positive results, mayors and other municipal leaders for the most part felt it was OK to conduct the study as long as they were under no obligation to join a countywide court system if one were created.

Freeholder David Lindenmuth invited all county mayors to attend the meeting with him, Freeholders Julie Acton and Jeff Hogan, and Kenneth DeRoberts and Dale Caldwell from Government Strategy Group.

The consulting firm will go ahead with the study if grant money is received from the state Department of Community Affairs which means municipalities won't have to pay.

The firm will be paid through the grant, so it will not receive money unless that grant is received.

Lindenmuth hopes municipalities will pass resolutions supporting the study, which would make receiving the DCA grant more likely.

Representatives were present from Pittsgrove, Salem, Penns Grove, Pennsville, Elsinboro, Woodstown, Elmer, Alloway, Lower Alloways Creek, and Mannington.

The feasibility study will also look at merging police departments, but will first concentrate on the court system.

"These are two issues that people brought to our attention and we thought we should look into it," Lindenmuth said, adding the purpose of the meeting was to have questions answered and find out details of the study.

The most important thing to remember is this is only a study and nothing more, he said.

"If it comes back and says it doesn't make sense, then it doesn't make sense," Lindenmuth said.

Even if the results are positive and show a merger could save taxpayers money, no municipalities would be mandated to join.

If it moves forward, each municipality that wishes to participate in a countywide court system would be responsible for paying for it it would not be paid for through county taxes.

Mannington Township Mayor Donald Asay was the first to speak up and say he didn't see a need for such a study when, first, many areas are already sharing courts, and second, shared services could be better used in areas like animal control.

Lindenmuth said animal control and other smaller areas can be looked into by local governments, but for something as large as sharing courts, it would be necessary for outside help to determine if it's in the best interest of residents.

The chief executive officer of Government Strategy Group, DeRoberts, said it was great that some municipalities already share courts because it puts Salem County ahead of the curve.

The study would see if shared services could go a step further.

"Could we make it work even better?" he asked. "Some shared services work, some don't."

He added his firm won't tell officials what to do. They are there to assist in exploring and coming up with positive or negative conclusions.

Areas they will look at include where the court could be held, if positions could be transferred around so no one loses a job and how revenue would fall back to the municipalities.

It could be a long-term project and every detail about how exactly this could be implemented will be examined.

The state is strongly pushing shared services right now as a way to save taxpayer money and Lindenmuth and DeRoberts said shared services is just another way to become more efficient.

DeRoberts said during the feasibility study, his firm would take into consideration and be sensitive of all unique needs here.

"If you choose not to be a part of this, you don't have to be," Lindenmuth said. "This is not something the freeholders are trying to jam down anyone's throat."

He also said that if the study doesn't cost anything, he didn't understand the resistance.

"If we're not paying for it, why not go ahead and do the study?" Pennsville Committeeman Jack Marquette asked the other municipal representatives.

If they decide when the study is done they don't want to be a part of it, they don't have to do it, he said.

Barbara Wright, Salem City Council clerk, said Salem is definitely on board and they think, if its possible, merging courts would be very beneficial.

"What works for some doesn't work for others," she said. "But it works for us."

Asay also agreed in the end that they might as well look into it since it won't hurt them, but some remained skeptical like Linda DuBois, a committeewoman from Pittsgrove.

Being that her township is so far from other areas, she didn't think it would make sense for Pittsgrove.

Lindenmuth said it's possible the court could move from municipality to municipality and said her concerns would be addressed. If she still doesn't feel comfortable, Pittsgrove doesn't have to be a part of it.

If the merger could be positive for the county, some areas could join right away and others could join when the time makes more sense for them, he added.

"If it is something we can do six months from now or two to three years from now, I think it will benefit the residents of Salem County," Lindenmuth said.